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ABSTRACT

Girls and boys write differently. Girls like to write about subjects close to home: self, friends, parents, teachers. Boys write about activities in the community beyond the home: technology, sports, policemen, firemen, war. Boys not only write about vigorous engagement but demonstrate it in the classroom where they tend to dominate while girls are more likely to be invisible. A study of second graders over an 8-month period of time supports the above generalizations and shows that teacher and peer responses to student writing can contribute to male dominance and female invisibility. After having heard several of Arnold Lobel's "Frog and Toad" stories, students wrote their own stories about frogs and toads. Analyses of the content of these stories demonstrates that boys write more about adventures and sports and girls write more about common experiences or relationships. Similar results were observed when children wrote stories on topics of their own choice. Interestingly, the writing process was different for boys and girls. Boys worked side by side, interested in what others were doing but anxious to produce work that distinguished them as individuals. Girls, on the other hand, produced stories on topics very similar; through their stories they participated in a kind of literary game that allowed them to be connected in a community while expressing their individuality. During critiques by the teacher and peers, the researcher observed that stories were evaluated according to largely male standards; girls' stories were considered boring because they did not involve conflict and adventure. (Contains 16 references.) (TB)

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Whose Stories are Validated?

by Susan Fleming

ED 381 789

Girls and boys write differently. Girls like to write about subjects close to home: self, friends, home, parents, teacher. Boys write about activities in the community beyond the home: technology, sports, policemen, firemen, war (Fleming, 1994; Graves, 1973; Lindell, 1980). Boys stories are filled with action (Graves, 1973) and this is reflected in their verb choices, with boys using more active verbs than girls (Lindell, 1980). The action that boys write about is often violent and dangerous while girls prefer to depict gentle activities (Fleming, 1994; Newman, 1993; Ollila, Bullen, and Collis, 1989). Analysis of the writing of a girl and boy from kindergarten through grade two showed that the girl was more interested in writing description and comment than in reporting action. This preference for gentleness extended to syntax; the girl's revealed passivity while the boy's exhibited a forceful stance (Kamler, 1993).

Boys not only to write about vigorous engagement but demonstrate it in the classroom where they tend to dominate while girls are more likely to be invisible (Sadker, 1994). In this article I will argue that the response to writing by teacher and peers can contribute to male dominance and female invisibility. Assumptions about what constitutes a good story have been male oriented throughout the history of composition instruction (Brody, 1993). Examining the gender bias of these assumptions, as they are played out in a second grade classroom, sheds light on the subtle ways girls' voices are silenced.

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The Hero Story

We have inherited from the Greeks the structure and content of the heroic adventure: The hero leaves home, has an adventure, and returns home. Developed in a male dominated society and taught to male students being prepared for civic life and military exploits, this model was appropriate. Why include in the curriculum the concerns of women when they neither attended school nor participated in public affairs? Stories, therefore, focused on male activities, the events which occurred outside the home. Helen's beauty may have launched a thousand ships, but the action of the *Iliad* revolves around the men - Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector - as they fight the Trojan War. *The Odyssey* narrates the adventures of Ulysses as he struggles to return to Greece after the war. His wife Penelope, waiting faithfully at home, is a secondary character.

The idea that tales of daring outside the realm of domestic concerns are more interesting than stories about everyday events close to home is deeply embedded in our culture. As I will show, this bias is evident in a primary grade writing classroom.

The Study

During an eight-month study of the behaviors of second graders demonstrating "ownership" of writing, I realized that ownership is claimed in gender specific as well as person specific ways. I will focus here on gender differences in the content of compositions and how "ownership" of that content can be affirmed or denied by peer and teacher response.

The 21 children in this primarily white middle/upper-middle class suburban classroom practiced expressive writing three times a week.

During two of these classes I was a participant/observer, conferencing with the children, observing student/teacher and peer conferences, interviewing the teacher and each individual child, and witnessing whole class evaluations of stories by the the teacher and peers. Data was collected by observational notes, audio-tapes, and photocopies of the children's work.

Frog and Toad Stories

The teacher introduced her students to the writing process by reading the Frog and Toad stories by Arnold Lobel. These are simple tales about the friendship between Frog and Toad, usually focused on everyday events such a losing a button, raking leaves, planting a garden. After the books had been read aloud, they were placed in the library corner for the children to read on their own whenever they had free time. Then the teacher asked her students to write their own Frog and Toad stories. All the children were enthusiastic about this assignment. But as the table below demonstrates, the content of the girls' and boys' stories varied markedly. (Numbers indicate the number of stories in each category.)

Content Categories in Frog and Toad Stories

	Boys	Girls
Adventures	13	5
Sports	8	1
Common Experiences or Relationships	5	12
Total	26	18

The boys tended to put Frog and Toad in dramatic situations removed from the concerns of everyday life, where they faced their adventures side by side as comrades concentrating on surviving their ordeal, while the girls focused on common experiences where the relationship between the characters was an important part of the action. This contrast is clearly evident in the stories of Adam and Amber.

Adam has - without realizing it - followed the story pattern outlined by Joseph Campbell (1949) in which the "hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won" (p.30).

> One night in Toad's house a robber came in. It stole everything. When Toad saw that, he put a For Sale sign outside. While Toad was doing that he said, "I don't want to live in a house with nothing."
>
> In twenty three hours, fifty nine minutes and seven seconds the house got sold. Toad timed it. Toad said, "I'm moving in to Frog's house today." When Frog heard that, Frog thought I don't want Toad to live here. We wouldn't have enough room and food. He said, "There's plenty of room in outer space to live in."
>
> Toad said, "Ok." Toad rented a spaceship because he wanted to see the aliens. While Frog was on the platform it closed. Frog was in the spaceship. Frog screamed, "Let me out! Let me out!"
>
> Toad said, "You don't have to get out. You can live with me." The engine started. Before Frog knew it he and Toad were in outer space. Then they saw their planet. Then they saw Mars, Jupiter, and Mercury. Then they saw Venus, Neptune, Pluto, and the sun. They didn't know where they were. They were lost.
>
> Then suddenly the spaceship stopped. The spaceship ran out of fuel. It was going down. It went through the clouds. It landed right in front of Toad's house. There was a For Sale sign up. Then Toad bought it for $40.26"

Adam's plot revolves around the drama and the unusualness of the situation he describes. Amber, however, in "Frog and Toad's Halloween" focuses on the intensity of Frog and Toad's interaction with each other. (Amber's original spelling has been retained in this story and others that were not published.)

> Won day Toad was over at Frog's house. Toad asked Frog if he wanted to go pick out his costom with Toad and Frog said yes. Then they went to the costom store. Toad and Frog found a costom. And they both ran tords it. Frog got there first and then Toad did. And they both fited over it for a long time. Then Toad said to Frog you are the meenest friend I ever had. And Frog and Toad fited for a long time. Then Frog said I got here first it sould be mine. So get out of here. I hate you Toad you are so mean to me. Frog was very mad at Toad. Frog was so mad he felt like he wanted to hit Toad.
>
> Toad ran all the way home but Frog was aspost to drive him. When Toad got home he was so mad for what Frog had done to him. Then Frog went home and had cookies and thought Toad would love to have some but he can't. Then the next day Frog went to Toad's house, but Toad was still mad at Frog. The next day Toad was still a little mad. When Toad had breakfast he felt a little better. But Toad realy wanted that costum. So he went to the costom store to get the costum so Frog would not get it. So Toad got in his car and went to the costum store. He got the costum and went home. When Toad got home he called Frog. And he said hi Frog I got the costum. That's okay Toad you can have the costum. I'll find anther won for halloween.
>
> Then Frog went to the costum store and Frog found a costum for halloween. Then Frog went to Toad's house to show toad his costum. Toad liked it alot. Then Frog tryed it on and it fited perfeckly. Frog said this is the best costum. And that night Frog and Toad had a super halloween.

While Adam created his story by leaping over the events of his own life, as if he thought them too uninteresting to deal with, Amber did not hesitate to create her story from the fabric of her experience. "[I]t really

did happen to a friend and me. . . though I did it in different words. . . I was Toad and she was Frog." The teacher chose to publish Adam's story, while Amber's, with its sure understanding of the way friends fight then gradually mend their relationship, was ignored.

Student-selected Topic Choice

After the initial writing assignment the children were free to choose their own topics, yet the pattern of the content categories remained the same.

Content Categories in Unassigned Stories

	Boys	Girls
Adventures	22	13
Sports	3	0
Common Experiences or Relationships	6	40
Total	31	53

Free to choose their own topics, the girls continued to favor stories which dealt with events close to home, with characters who worked out their differences through compromise and cooperation, while the boys favored confrontational dramas with winners and losers. The contrast between the work of Elliott and Margery is a vivid example.

Elliott and Margery had similar personality characteristics. Both children, though cooperative members of the class, were assertive in expressing their opinions, unafraid to disagree with their peers during class discussions or to correct the teacher on some minor mistake. Both

children were cheerful, friendly, and quick to see the humor in a situation. Other children looked to them for ideas.

Capable students, both Margery and Elliott thought of themselves as writers. They moved quickly beyond the initial Frog and Toad story to pursue their own agendas. All these similarities make the differences between their stories more striking.

Elliott was fascinated by *Star Trek*. He was thoroughly familiar with *Star Trek* episodes from books, movies, and TV shows. His stories were composed of characters, incidents, and language from a variety of *Star Trek* episodes, laced with bits of World War II history. Although he borrowed the fragments, his design was original. Elliott's "War of Freedom" was his fourth *Star Trek* episode.

> It is the year 3000. Earth is ruled by aliens. Your phone rings. You answer it. "Who is it?" you ask.
> "Yeh, yeh, ok." I hang up the phone. "By, Mom. Military needs me. We're attacking an alian base."
> You jump in your car and leave and drive to the Air Base. The alarm rings. Get in your fighters! The Widow the fleet's pride ship was first to take of. All of a sudden the whole skwadren (squadron) jumped into hyper space. At Star Wolf 359 they confronted aleins. The skwadren was destroyed. After that it was up to savilyens (civilians) to fight. One savilyen threw up from being air sick. Unfortetly, earth lost and evry one was exacuted one by one, starting with children. Earth civlisation was crushed.

In Elliott's story only the space ship and the star have specific names, the people are presented impersonally. Aside from mention of a phone, a car, and the detail about the civilian throwing up from being air sick, the story is far removed from Elliott's life experience.

Margery's story, however, despite its setting in the heavens and its reference to the goddess Aphrodite, is firmly rooted in the soil of her own world. While Elliott foresaw the end of the world, Margery visualized continuity and the logical progression of succeeding generations.

Loving horses and being an experienced rider, Margery pored over Stephen Cosgrove's *Shimmeree*, a book in the classroom library about a winged horse. She also knew the story of Pegasus. Drawing on these two sources, she created her own tale of a winged horse, Starrla. (Margery's spelling has been corrected since this book was published.)

> Starrla was at Mount Olympus. She threw many temper tantrums in a week. When she had a temper tantrum she would usually rear up on her back legs and buck and buck. Aphrodite could hear this. In case you didn't know, Aphrodite is the goddess of love.
>
> Aphrodite could hear Starrla's temper tantrums from her room. Occasionally she heard a loud whinny. . . . Aphrodite came to where Starrla slept outside. She shouted to Starrla with her teeth clamped tight, "My dear Starrla, stop crying this instant."
>
> But Starrla wouldn't stop. She sobbed and sobbed, "Are there any others like me?"
>
> Aphrodite had an idea. She would find a stallion for Starrla. She set up how they would meet. Starrla was on her daily walk, when she met a young stallion. They fell in love right away that morning. . . . Soon they were married and had a colt named Lightning Bolt and a filly (that's a girl baby) named Moonshine. . . . Pretty soon Moonshine and Lightning Bolt were married and they had children and then they had children and pretty soon, Starrla was a great, great, great, great, great grandmother.

A Writing Community of Girls

As writers the boys worked side by side, interested in what others were doing, but anxious to produce work that distinguished them as individuals. Many of the girls did this also but four girls, including Margery, produced magic horse stories. The three girls who followed Margery's lead were not "copying" Margery. Capable readers and prolific writers who had plenty of original ideas, they shared a love of animals, particularly horses. Each girl created her own distinctive magic horse tale, but through the stories they participated in a kind of literary game which allowed them to be connected while expressing their individuality.

Kim presented her winged character as a unicorn Pegasus called "Singing Star" who lived "with the other unicorn pegises (sic) on the magic planet". Mae's story, "My Magic Horse", had a human scale setting. It began:

> One day a little girl named Morine tuck a walk to the beach. And she found a baby horse but she she did not no it was a magic horse because the horse's wings were to short to see.

Louise invented a horse named Moon Beam who was concerned about being "the last of her kind". With the help of "Ms Wise Witch" she was able to produce a filly. Louise went on to write three stories about Moon Beam. The third entitled "Crystal and Diamond" recounts the day Moon Beam became a grandmother. (This story was edited though it was not published).

> One hot afternoon Wildcat and Moon Beam were swimming in a pond. Suddenly Thunderbird came plunging down calling them. He sounded a little scared. "Starlight just had two fillys and their names are Crystal and Diamond," he called. "Oh my." Moon Beam sounded surprised.

When they got there they saw that Diamond and Crystal were twins. The only way to tell them apart was that Diamond had a black sploch on her wing. Starlight and Crystal were still asleep but Diamond was up and eating.

"Oh!" said Moon Beam.

Starlight, Thunderbird, Diamond, and Crystal were now a family. Slowly in Starlight's care Crystal and Diamond grew into beautiful four year olds. Diamond's black patch grew into a nice design and Crystal learned that she could stand on her hind legs! But as they grew older their wings shrunk back until they were gone.

Years later Crystal had a foal. She named it Streak because when she ran she looked like a streak. When their wings disappeared from the magic wearing out it left them with another power. That she could give birth to a child without a mate.

A month after Crystal had her foal, Diamond had a colt. She named it Sun Beam. The day before Diamond gave birth she went to the beach and got a suntan that would last her a lifetime.

On the last page of this story Louise drew a family tree showing Moon Beam as the trunk with her progeny branching outward. We can see how Margery, who wrote her story about Starrla's Family after Louise had completed "The Last Mare", borrowed Louise's idea of an animal being the last of its kind. "Starrla's Family" and "The Last Mare" were written around the same time and both girls developed the idea of succeeding generations.

Peer and Teacher Response

After Louise read her story aloud to her classmates one afternoon, the teacher asked, "Is there a real problem in this story?"

Elliott - No

Neal - That makes it kinda - I think it was kinda dull because it didn't have a real problem.

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Margery - I thought it was a good story.
Teacher - Well, I don't think Neal means, you don't mean to hurt Louise's feelings, do you?
Neal - No, no.
Teacher - You're just saying that sometimes stories without problems aren't . . . as exciting or as interesting and that's often why when we started learning to write, Margery, that I emphasized finding a problem.

The difference between male and female definitions of an interesting story are apparent here. Of course Elliott didn't like this story; it was far removed from the kind he enjoyed. And no wonder Neal, who was writing a story based on a video game in which his hero killed "100 tree monsters who rose out of the swamp" with a magic sword which shot "fireballs", found Louise's story "kinda dull". Nor is it any surprise that Margery assessed Louise's story as "a good one"; it was the kind she liked to write.

What is also telling is the teacher's reaction. This teacher was proud of "the strong women" in her class. She frequently read the class stories about women who made important contributions to history such as Abigail Adams and Amelia Earhart. The books in the reading corner had a generous supply of books with female protagonists. This teacher was a caring, committed educator. She responded, as any of us might have, by using the male model to define "a good story", assuming it to be gender neutral. But one size does not fit all in story making. Applebee (1973) pointed out that boys and girls define an exciting fantasy in different ways. Louise's story did not fit the male model because she was not concerned with a heroic exploit but with the mystery and wonder of birth. Her details in "Crystal and Diamond" show an understanding of the nuances of response to this event: Thunderbird sounding "a little scared" when

telling the news to his mother-in-law; Moon Beam, at a loss for words, can only exclaim, "Oh my!" When viewing the babies she notices small differences between them, as anyone does when looking at twins.

Is it appropriate to label this tale, dealing with the universal drama of birth, as "kinda dull"? This is a story of celebration not of conflict resolution. Celebratory tales of appreciation, connection, and continuity written by the girls in this class were not validated if they contained no "problem". Even if they did contain a problem, their insights into the nature of relationships were not affirmed. Amber's story is an example of this with it's depiction of the anatomy of a quarrel between friends.

What message is given to girls when their stories exploring the meaning of relationships are brushed aside? "Crystal and Diamond" was not published, nor was Amber's "Frog and Toad's Halloween". Louise told me in my interview with her that "Crystal and Diamond" was not her best story "because as the whole class is saying [it] doesn't have a problem".

The issue is not whether the curriculum should encourage young writers to compose stories focused around a problem to be solved. Problem/resolution is an important definition of story. But is it the only valid one? The girls who wrote descriptive, celebratory stories demonstrated an ability to write conflict/resolution tales on other occasions. However, all their ideas did not fit into this mold. Is it fair to girls to present the conflict/resolution model as the only legitimate definition of story? Is it fair to girls to ignore the understanding of relationships which they bring to their writing? Is it fair to assess the domestic concerns they choose to write about as less interesting, less important than heroic exploits far from home?

Occasionally boys moved away from sports contests and slaying dangerous foes to write gentler stories such as Adam's about Frog and Toad picking out a Christmas tree. He ended it:

> On Christmas there was a present to both of them. They argued because they both wanted to open it. Then Frog said, "Let's both open it." So they both opened it and got what they wanted. They got . . . ORNAMENTS!

This story with its sophisticated use of ellipsis points to create suspense - made more dramatic because the single word "ornaments" appeared by itself on the last page - and its description of cooperation to resolve a difference of opinion was not chosen for publication. It was passed over in favor of "Frog and Toad in Outer Space". What message does this give to Adam?

Conclusion

Preventing girls from being silenced and marginalized in our writing classrooms is not a matter of teaching girls to be as assertive as their male peers. Nor is it a matter of teaching them to write like boys. Such an approach assumes that male story making provides a gender neutral standard appropriate for both sexes. But, as we have seen, girls and boys have different ideas to express. These differences need to be not only considered, but applauded. While boys' stories of adventure and daring provide a model of risk-taking from which girls can profit, boys are sorely in need of an understanding of the subtleties of relationships which girls' stories can provide.

Recognition of the strengths girls bring to the writing classroom is only possible if we educators examine and reevaluate our ideas about what

constitutes a good story. Have we internalized the idea that the most exciting events in life happen outside the home so thoroughly that we dismiss girls' stories as passive and uninteresting - "kinda dull"? The view that one must leave home and hearth and loved ones for meaningful adventures is as limiting as the view that one cannot leave home and hearth and loved ones.

Sue Adler (1994), writing about the texts children read, stressed the importance of reevaluating

> the qualities we look for in text and to change our view of the significance of domestic, commonplace, and everyday events.. stories of mothers and daughters, and interpersonal relationships (p.86).

We need to also reevaluate the importance of female concerns in the texts children write. As writing teachers we stress the importance of children "owning" their texts. But how can girls "own" their texts if the domestic concerns they want to include in their stories are judged "boring"? How can boys "own" the texts in which they tentatively explore cooperation, if this virtue is not identified as a viable alternative to confrontation in resolving story conflicts?

When the concept of what constitutes an engaging story is enlarged to include stories of cooperation and domestic connection as well as tales of heroic conquest, both girls and boys benefit. The ability to care for others is not an exclusively female trait, nor is the capacity for heroic exploits exclusively male. Both girls and boys claim their full humanity by developing both the capacity to nurture and the ability to take risks. Children are continually bombarded with a confrontational, winner-take-all model of dealing with differences through TV programs, movies, and

video games. We help to perpetuate this limited and destructive mentality if we fall into the trap of assuming that girls can only earn the right to be taken seriously by imitating the aggressive behavior of boys and writing exclusively in a model designed to fit males. Girls view the world differently and the difference of their view is needed to humanize society and our classrooms.

George Wood (1990) wrote:

> We take for granted that our schools are communities, when in fact they are merely institutions that can become communities only if we work at it. But with proper attention to all the individuals within the school, we can create for students an experience that demonstrates what it means to be a compassionate, involved citizen. For it is only within a community, not an institution, that we learn how to hold fast to such principles as working for the common good, empathy, equity, and self respect (p.33).

Girls have much to contribute to the writing classroom. If we are serious about creating a community of learners, we cannot afford to silence their voices.

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